Combating Sexual Exploitation Online:
Focus on the Networks of People, not the Technology

Statement to Massachusetts Attorney General Martha Coakley
as part of the Hearing on Sexual Exploitation Online

danah boyd
October 19, 2010

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you today. I am thankful for your willingness and interest in addressing sexual exploitation and the victimization of children. I have been working on issues related to exploitation since 1998. For eight years, I worked for a non-profit called V-Day, building a global community dedicated to ending violence against women and girls. As a sociologist and scholar, I have been examining social media since 1999 and I have focused on the role of technology in the lives of young people since 2004. In 2008, I co-directed the Internet Safety Technical Task Force with John Palfrey and Dena Sacco to examine online sexual solicitation and other abuses of children online. More recently, I've been co-directing the Youth and Media Policy Working Group with John Palfrey and Urs Gasser at Harvard's Berkman Center, with funding by the MacArthur Foundation. I am speaking with you today as an independent scholar, not as a representative of my employer Microsoft Research. I am here because I want to eradicate human trafficking and end sexual abuse and because I'm worried that misunderstandings of the role of technology may hinder our efforts to end exploitation. Even when we disagree on strategy, please understand that stopping violence is my top priority and I'm happy to help you in any way that I can as you proceed.

...

Technology is reconfiguring many aspects of everyday life, but the most significant changes come from how it's changing the structures of visibility, allowing us to "see" social interactions and human behavior from a different vantage point. Because of the Internet, we have the ability to see into worlds that are far from our own, witness the interactions of people that we would not normally see in our daily lives. This creates new opportunities and challenges. Heightened visibility can easily prompt fear, as we become concerned about the things that we see that we don't like. But the least productive thing that we can do with visibility is use it to generate fear. While fear and outrage can propel us to act, driving policy by fear can easily backfire and harm those that we're trying to help.

When it comes to the Internet and exploitation, most people lament the new opportunities for buyers and sellers to connect, but fail to realize how these very same structures also provide new opportunities to intervene because it's possible to "see" the trade in entirely new light. Historically, it has been very difficult to track exploitation. Underground

networks operate with little trace and people are bought and sold with no one knowing it. With the global trafficking trade, much focus has been placed on airlines and international bank transfers because this was the only site of above ground visibility. As people turn to technology to negotiate exchanges, new data becomes available and new interactions become traceable. If everyone is willing and engaged, it becomes possible to track the flow of information around an exploitative trade in entirely new ways.

In the physical world, law enforcement focuses on streets, bars, or back alleys when combating exploitation. Law enforcement is given a jurisdiction and focuses on eliminating the supply. This doesn't make the supply go away - whenever there is high demand, there are people willing to do horrific things to make money. But with jurisdictional boundaries, focusing on supply tends to put a dent into exploitation, or at least move it to a different jurisdiction.

Ending exploitation online requires different tactics. It's not possible to corner a space or see all victims who are being advertised as "for sale." When the demand is high, you can't end exploitation online by looking for places where the supply is aggregated. Even when there are spaces that are especially notorious for exploitation, they are only the tip of the iceberg.

The Internet is structured entirely through networks - networks of people connected through technology. As long as people are able to connect, they can move through different online spaces. You may be able to see transactions through Craigslist or Back Page, but there are countless other technologies that are employed in exploitation. And every time that you try to make it disappear on one place, it pops up on another. Increasingly, those sites are offshore and far out of jurisdiction. People don't have to be co-located to connect and they don't have to be in the same area. Those engaging in exploitation are using the technology; technology is not creating exploitation itself. The technology is not nearly as powerful or important as the networks of people. And because of this, focusing on sites of supply online is not as effective as focusing on the networks of supply and demand that move from site to site.

Going after specific sites where exploitation becomes visible and attempting to eradicate the visibility does nothing to address the networks of supply and demand – it simply pushes them to evolve and exploiters find new digital haunts and go further underground. Exchanges are encoded such that they're invisible to those who aren't in the know. Every time that a site disappears, new codes emerge and the networks become harder to track. Eradicating visibility does not break the trade network itself but it does make it harder to get to the source of exploitation.

In order to combat exploitation online, you need to focus on breaking the buyer-seller relationship networks that underpin the trade. You want to invade the networks such that it becomes risky to engage in exploitative practices, as either a buyer or a seller. You want criminals to be afraid that every transaction they attempt is likely to land them in prison. You want to make those engaged in exploitation terrified of who's on the other end of the network. In many ways, this is similar to what you do when you do embedded

intelligence and stings, but it's more important online. In some ways, it's easier because you too get to hide behind pseudonymity. In other ways, it's much harder. There's a fine line between doing embedded investigations and engaging in entrapment. And having most interactions online before moving offline makes it difficult to respectfully navigate that line.

To be most effective, you should focus on the naïve buyers who are most likely to make mistakes that make their illegal activities visible. You want to pull victims off the street and learn from them. You should not punish those who are victimized by exploitation. You should then work up the chain, finding pimps and those engaged in trafficking at scale. Keep in mind that your buyers are much more likely to make mistakes and much more likely to leave traces than your sellers. Leverage this to your advantage. And make certain that you get anyone who is victimized out of the networks of abuse as fast as possible.

...

As you examine how to combat sexual exploitation, I have five requests of you:

1) Please don't get distracted by how technology makes sex work visible. Focus on learning from the visibility so that you can help those being exploited. Develop cross-jurisdictional intelligence teams who strategically work to understand the networks of those engaged in exploitation. Engage companies to collaborate with you in combating exploitation. Work with victims and build intelligence.

2) Develop strategies that will allow you to break up the networks that underpin the exploitative sexual trade. Don't focus on specific sites, but on the relationships and the trust networks upon which the trade takes place. If you focus on the sites, you will be playing whack-a-mole and helping no one. The people involved in the trade will continuously move from site to site so invade the networks. Going after the abusers first and foremost will prove far more effective than going after specific sites where they are temporarily visible. And please, I beg you, don't treat those who are victimized as criminals in the process.

3) Rethink what law enforcement means in a digital era. Work to break down jurisdictional barriers and provide resources for law enforcement to collaborate across jurisdictions and with technology companies. This means making sure that your law enforcement teams have the technological savvy to work with the technology and the social mindset to focus on helping those who are exploited. You're going to have to rethink through what it means to do digital stings and how to handle operations that cross jurisdictions. Even in domestic trafficking, the networks involved in exploitation are never going to be in a single jurisdiction. One of the most frustrating aspects of talking with law enforcement is learning how often they know about people who are abused or can identify criminals who are engaged in exploitation but lack the resources or the jurisdictional authority to actually intervene and bring the criminals to trial.

4) Start involving social scientists in this process to help you measure what's taking place and how effective different interventions are as you explore new tactics. We don't currently know whether or not more children are involved in the sex industry today than they were 20 years ago. We don't know how the technology has statistically changed the picture. I strongly recommend working with the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center, coordinated by David Finkelhor. His early examinations of juvenile prostitution highlight how little is currently known and how often law enforcement's current approach to addressing exploitation cases causes more problems than it solves.

5) Finally, build a strategy that is focused on directly helping the victims of exploitation. Not only do they need to be identified and their exploiters punished, but the victims need help transitioning from a life of sexual exploitation into a life where they have structural support. Those who are exploited rely heavily on their abusers for everything from sustenance to emotional support. Many are dependent on chemicals. You can pull them out of the dangerous situations in which they are embedded, but you need to help them transition or they'll end up getting back involved in the trade at different levels. The challenges involved in this transition have been well documented by the Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS) in New York. Stopping exploitation is of utmost importance, but helping exploited individuals recover is a critical part of the process.

...

I recognize that many who are working to end exploitation believe that eliminating "adult services" on Craigslist, Back Page, and other sites seems like a good idea. I respectfully disagree. There is no doubt that many people are trafficked through these sites, but it's important to understand the full context. Craigslist is the largest classified site out there and a lot of illegal activity operates across all classified sites without anyone knowing. Human trafficking on Craigslist is rarely visible – Craigslist has long worked hard to eliminate and report that content as fast as possible. But an overpriced teddy bear may not be what you think it is.

Keep in mind that there are many different levels of the sex industry. The Sex Workers Project differentiates participation in prostitution and sex work as: 1) by choice; 2) due to circumstance; 3) out of coercion. Even if you want to curb all three, combating each type of sex work requires different strategies. The end of "adult services" outraged many consensual sex workers who argue for legalizing prostitution because they see the online marketplace as a way to escape pimps. We can argue about whether or not this is a good thing, but it's important not to treat these consensual sex workers under the same umbrella as those who are directly exploited or trafficked. Most visible online sex work comes from consensual sex workers in gray area markets – escort services, nude modeling, stripping, etc. All too often, I fear that law enforcement targets these areas because they are more visible and easy to identify. Frankly, those who are trafficked and exploited need far more attention than those who are working in gray area services.

Identifying them is much harder but much more important. But eradicating the visibility of gray area sex work will do little to actually curb exploitation.

Sexual exploitation is fundamentally about supply and demand, money and power. The social and economic networks that underpin it can be visible on nearly any site if you look hard enough. They are especially visible on sites where it's easy to make a monetary exchange. Figuring out what's happening requires being in-the-know, knowing what keywords are used by those engaged in exploitation and understanding how the networks operate. You need intelligence and you need informants. There's a lot of information available, functionally visible, but difficult to decode without having access to the structures of information. And, unfortunately, those involved in exploitation are developing new strategies to evade visibility as each year goes by and as each intervention takes place. So you need strategies that can evolve.

When you identify sites where sexual exploitation is occurring, please don't focus on hiding the content. Focus on what's visible to find those engaged in trafficking and bring them to justice. And reach out to victims and provide them with social services. Work with companies to develop intelligence and to map out the networks so that you can invade them and directly help those who are caught in the web. I feel as though the approach that the AGs have taken in dealing with Craigslist has resulted in a huge lost opportunity. Requiring credit cards and charging those who engage in "adult services" helped you track those engaged in consensual sex work, but did nothing to identify those engaged in exploitation. Furthermore, those engaged in exploitation moved to other parts of the site long ago, hiding among more legitimate trades. Craigslist has been willing to work with law enforcement from the get go, which cannot be said for other companies. You need companies who have intelligence to work with you to help you figure out the networks and end exploitation. Craigslist has worked hard to identify potential victims so that you can investigate; you need to work with them – and with other sites – so that you can be more effective and proactive. I beg you to work directly with companies to identify exploitation on these sites and pull victims off the streets rather than hoping that making the content disappear visibly will result in a decline of the industry. Sadly, that won't happen. The content that you see is only the tip of the iceberg.

...

Everyone in this room wants human trafficking and sexual exploitation to end now. The question at the table is really one of strategy. My concern is that it's too easy to focus on the technology as the key issue because it is what makes exploitation more visible today than ever before. But at this moment, we do not actually even know the scope of the problem, let alone the effectiveness of our techniques. We do not know whether or not the removal of "adult services" on Craigslist did anything to address exploitation. So why are we demanding that other sites do the same? What if this approach backfired and caused more damage?

When it comes to technology policy, it's too easy to mistake visibility for causation. It's too easy to assume that technology is the cause and not simply the conduit. I strongly

believe that the causes of exploitation come down to money and power; those in the business use whatever tools are available to make the trade. Their work is despicable and their engagement with technology is parasitic. But if we focus on the technology, we will not make a dent in addressing the underlying problem and helping the people who need us most. We need to destroy the fabric of the exploitation trade - we need to destroy the social connections through which they operate and the incentives for them to exploit and traffic people. Technology simply reveals the networks upon which information flows.

Working to end exploitation is a noble goal and I commend you for trying to tackle this plague on our society, but I beg you to focus on exploitation directly and not get sidetracked by technology. Just because the technology makes exploitation more visible does not mean that it causes exploitation or that eliminating the technology will make exploitation go away. It will only evolve. And I'm scared of what this means if we don't evolve with it.

Thank you for your consideration. Please let me know if there's anything that I can do to help you in your effort to end sexual exploitation.

Sincerely,

Dr. danah boyd
Research Associate, Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society
danah@danah.org